

CHIP to enroll more children

By The Associated Press - 12/08/05

HELENA (AP) — The state health department said it plans to increase by 2,000 the number of children who can get free or low-cost health insurance through the Children's Health Insurance Program.

Joan Miles, director of the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, said about 12,000 children are currently enrolled in the program, which provides health insurance for children of low-income families.

The CHIP expansion is possible because of increased funding by the 2005 Legislature and because voters approved a cigarette tax increase in 2004, designating part of that money for CHIP.

"Parents who think that affordable health coverage for their kids is an impossible dream should explore CHIP as a solution," Miles said. "We have no waiting list and we're moving ahead to sign up 2,000 new kids, so the time is right."

The program is funded with a mixture of state and federal money. The state purchases insurance through Blue Cross Blue Shield and currently pays a premium of \$125 per month per child.

The cost of private health insurance is out of reach for many working families and many employers do not offer insurance to employees, let alone their families, Miles noted.

Miles said as many as 15,000 children in Montana meet CHIP eligibility guidelines.

Under those guidelines, a family of three with an annual household income of \$24,135 or a family of four with an annual household income of \$29,025 may be

eligible for CHIP. The income level may even be higher for some families, depending on the number of family members working and how much they pay for child care.

Applications are available at local public health departments, offices of public assistance, community health centers, Head Start locations, Indian Health Services and tribal clinics, as well as at participating hospitals and doctors' offices or by calling, toll-free, 1-877-543-7669.